

FALSE ALARM PREVENTION GUIDE

Fire alarms activate accidentally for many different reasons. When they activate accidentally they can become a nuisance, desensitize people to the alarms and ultimately lead to a less effective warning system. They also tie up fire department resources, preventing them from responding to actual emergencies. Preventing these false alarms is as varied as the different types of false alarms there are. Here are some of the common ways to help prevent future false alarms:

Unknown fire alarm causes – Fire alarm systems that activate due to unknown reasons can be very difficult to diagnose and fix.

Prevention: Annual maintenance by qualified personnel will help prevent many failures. Having a fire alarm service tech examine the system as soon as possible after the unknown activation can increase the chances that the cause can be determined. Also, due to the unknown circumstances of the alarm activation, it is not known if the alarm system is actually working until a service person examines the system.

Improper alarm type – Alarm systems sound 3 different alarm types: Trouble, Supervisory and Fire alarm. The only one that should come to the fire department is the Fire Alarm. The rest should go to the building owner or manager. If the alarm is not set up correctly or the monitoring company has it programmed incorrectly, trouble or supervisory alarms can come through to the fire department, causing a false alarm.

Prevention: Correct initial set up and good continued annual maintenance will help prevent this most of the time. But in the event it happens at your building, get with your alarm company to correct the programming to ensure the alarms go to the right place. Also be sure your alarm monitoring company has at least two up-to-date after-hours emergency contacts for your facility.

Pull station activation – Fire alarm pull stations are there to allow a quick activation of the fire alarm system in the event of an emergency. They also can be a great temptation for young children to pull out of curiosity or others to pull maliciously. There are also times that these can be bumped, broken or fail causing the alarm to sound.

Prevention: Annual maintenance by qualified personnel will help prevent many failures. For accidental or intentional activations, protective covers can be installed over the pull stations to prevent or deter these activations. If they are needed in an emergency the cover can be quickly removed and the alarm pulled. The cover usually has a small buzzer in it to alert people nearby that the cover has been removed, preventing many accidental or intentional activations.

Dust in a smoke detector – Smoke detectors and alarms are looking for particulates in the air: dust, smoke and steam are all examples of that.

Prevention: Annual maintenance and cleaning by qualified personnel will help prevent many failures. If a detector is near a dust producing appliance that alarm can be changed out to a heat detector to prevent the accidental activations. Sometimes detectors just need more regular cleaning than the annual maintenance.

Smoke from burnt food activating a smoke detector – Burnt food such as toast and popcorn produce smoke, just what a smoke alarm and detector are looking for.

Prevention: Many times the cooking appliance is just too close to the smoke detector. Moving the appliance further away can help. In break rooms and food bar areas, replacing the detector with a heat detector can reduce the false alarm chances and still provide the needed protection.

System not in Test Mode – When servicing a fire alarm or sprinkler system, an alarm system can be triggered unintentionally and cause a response one when is not warranted.

Prevention: Whenever any work is to be done on the buildings fire alarm, fire sprinkler, hood suppression or special extinguishing systems, the fire alarm system monitoring company should be contacted prior to the work to place the system into what is considered “test mode”. This allows the alarm system to still work in the building but will not transmit an alarm to the fire department right away. Instead the alarm company will verify with the servicing company that the activation was not caused by their actions before having us respond. Other times when test mode can be used: when painting is occurring in fire alarm protected areas, after water damage that includes the fire alarm system or whenever an alarm could be caused accidentally by servicing or maintenance operations.

Activations by particulates in the air (steam, dust, fake smoke, etc) – Smoke detectors are checking for particulates in the air. Steam, dust and fake smoke are all particulates. Any of these in the air can cause the fire alarm system to activate.

Prevention: Annual maintenance and cleaning by qualified personnel will help prevent many of these. Equipment operators should be aware of the fire alarm system and work to keep steam, dust or particulates from their operation from getting to the detectors. If a detector is near a steam, dust or fake smoke producing appliance that alarm could be covered to prevent the accidental activations. You can also contact your fire alarm company to have the system put into a “test mode” so that any accidental activation does not transmit to the fire department but still provides protection to the buildings occupants.

Equipment failure – Alarm system components fail from time to time. Sometimes they fail and cause the alarm system to send a signal to the alarm monitoring company even when the bells and strobes don’t activate.

Prevention: Pay attention to abnormal conditions at your alarm panel. A beeping panel usually means something has failed and needs to be repaired. Indicator lights or messages indicating “trouble” or “supervisory” also need to be investigated and corrected. Annual maintenance by qualified personnel will help prevent many failures. But in the event it happens at your building, have your fire alarm service company out as soon as possible to find the problem and correct it to prevent future false alarms and to be assured that your system functions properly in an actual emergency.

NOTE ABOUT PERMITS: Changes made to a fire alarm system, such as replacing smoke detectors with heat detectors, or relocating detectors or other alarm components, may require the permission of the building or fire department. Consult with the building or fire department prior to making any changes.